

The Spoken Word Reverberates

THE WORDS WERE MOVING, spoken in a voice that sounded almost like weeping. They were spoken in Spanish, boisterous, yet sharp with meaning. They were sassy, uttered with Tejana attitude. They were songs recited rhythmically, in the cadence of hip-hop. They were pronounced quietly, reminding us of the poet's patient, observing eye.

"¡Viva!" came the shout.

"¡Voz!" we responded.

And suddenly the audience itself was part of the poetry.

This vibrant scene took place in the main reading room of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection on April 2, 2015. The event was the thirteenth annual ¡A Viva Voz!, LLILAS Benson's signature celebration of U.S. Latina/o culture. This edition was titled *Migraciones: An Evening of Poetry and Spoken Word*, and featured an array of poet-performers, each utterly different than the others, each captivating and engaging in his or her own way.

According to Margo Gutierrez, Mexican American and Latina/o studies librarian at the Benson Collection, "the idea for ¡A Viva Voz! came from Ann Hartness, former head librarian. It was meant to attract community members who might otherwise not know about the Benson Collection and about the rich resources found here about Latinas/os and Mexican Americans. It continues to be important for those reasons, particularly as the Latina/o population increases in and around Austin."

The first-ever ¡A Viva Voz! featured poet Pat Mora. In subsequent years, the guests have included playwrights, artists, filmmakers, musicians, and a cartoonist. "This year," says Gutierrez, "we felt the time was right to return to poetry and spoken word with a diverse group of poets and artists who span generations and genres." The Benson couldn't have picked a better lineup.

The event was moderated by the animated Celeste Guzmán Mendoza, poet and co-founder of CantoMundo, a nonprofit that supports and nurtures the work of Latina/o poets. She engaged the audience with

a rousing call and response—"¡Viva!" "¡Voz!"—and shared her own contribution to the evening, "The Crooked Pinky." Mendoza also serves as Associate Director for Development at LLILAS Benson.

Each of the readers who followed brought a unique voice and presence. Ariana Brown shared her vulnerability and reflections on identity in beautifully crafted pieces. She is a senior at UT and a co-founder of Spitshine Poetry, a slam poetry group that has won numerous competitions and accolades.

Marco Cervantes (aka Mexican Stepgrandfather) declaimed in hip-hop rhythms and rhymes as he touched on difficult themes of race and discrimination. In addition to being a performer, he is assistant professor in the Department of Bilingual and Bicultural Studies at UT San Antonio, where he teaches and researches transculturation and shared spaces among African American and Mexican American communities.

Odaymara Cuesta and Olivia Prendes, Cuban-born artists who perform together as Las Krudas, opened with an exquisite capella Afro-Cuban duet before launching into their set of hip-hop-inflected poems, which they performed both together and separately, mostly in Spanish. Self-identified queer feminist activists, the pair has a strong creative background in Havana's street art and performance scene. Their beautifully written material ranged from searing to humorous.

Poet, author, and educator Teresa Palomo Acosta closed the evening with a cycle of five works she wrote about a boy named Justin and his mother, Paula, who are refugees from Honduras. "I met them at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas, when I traveled to the Rio Grande Valley to teach oral history to college students in fall 2014," Palomo Acosta explains. "This and the other four poems I wrote about Justin and Paula were drawn from our time together, and from my concern about the possible outcomes of their journey through the American judicial system as Central American refugees."

May the poems and images that follow speak for themselves and resonate with that common part of all of us. —Susanna Sharpe

at 13th Annual iA Viva Voz!

INVOCATION

after aracelis girmay, arati warrier, and angel nafs

you were once teenage purveyor of the white girl gospel— zealous pupil of the hot comb, of oily neck and folded ear, but before that, you were young. you were probed with questions about your dead father and your hair. your first conversation with god, faithless. child of the singing forehead. child of the frustrated wrist. your mother yelled because you fell asleep on your aunt's pillows and now the whole couch smells of you. child of amorous pomade. everyone can tell where you've been. even bus windows remember your name. child of the curl that stole the wind's fury. how could everything about you not be bursting? child of the busted chongo. child of the broken brush. splitting anything weak in half while still blushing for a gentle hand. you are your own lesson in commitment. child of royalty, of the silk scarf before bed. defender from the cotton resurrected each night to steal you back, every pillowcase a looming field of ghosts. child of the rained out funeral. child of grocery bag protection. at age twelve, washing your own hair is your first act of humility. listening to your blackness, your first mode of resistance. child of the eloquent scalp, which negotiations did you lose today? how many times did you lift your hands in ceremony to unravel and partition? tell us how you learned to fix, fluff, and plait; to wind and plow. how you were late for class and work doing so. how you skipped breakfast. how you tended. how you greeted a new ancestor in the mirror and let their moans trickle and slither down the length of you. how each strand circles back to its own beginning. child of inheritance, rejecting gravity & its theorems. the eternal fuck you. when the weather catches you unprepared, you curse each raindrop undoing your labor with its disrespectful weight; but unlike anything else in the world, when smothered in water, submerged in a substance thick enough to kill you, nearly drowned and gasping— you rise, and refusing invisibility, grow to the size all benevolent gods are.

ARIANA BROWN



Todavía.

Opresiones, opresiones, se cruzan las opresiones.
Hasta lxs más oprimidxs oprimimos, opresiones.



No porque esté presente
eso significa que mi corazón asiente.

No porque en silencio esté
eso significa que apruebo lo que dice uste'.

No porque aquí vine a sobrevivir
eso significa que voy a compartir
lo que quienes dominan determinan.

Nací y crecí en Cuba y
tomé los "beneficios" de su socialismo o muerte,
eso no significa que esté de acuerdo con ellxs.

Emigré a Estados Unidos
y cobro y pago dólares culpables asesinos,
eso no significa que esté de acuerdo con ellxs.

Diariamente contribuyo
con el aburguesamiento de la ciudad,
eso no significa que esté de acuerdo con ellxs.

He tenido que servir a quienes
explícita o implícitamente discriminan a mis hermanxs,
eso no significa que esté de acuerdo con ellxs.

Aunque llore o sonría en silencio
ante las injusticias de quienes mandan,
eso no significa que esté de acuerdo con ellxs.

Algunxs han podido elegir.

Algunxs, sólo algunxs.

Soy artista, *soy emigrante*. Soy Negra, *soy emigrante*.
Soy consciente, *soy emigrante*. Soy cubana, *soy emigrante*.

Soy rarx, *soy emigrante*. Soy Krudx, *soy emigrante*.

No conforme. *Soy emigrante*. Soy activista, *soy emigrante*.

Soy anarquista, *soy emigrante*. Soy feminista, *soy emigrante*.

Todavía hay tantx que no hemos tenido la opción de denunciar.

Todavía hay tantx que no hemos tenido la opción.

Todavía hay tantx que no hemos tenido.

Todavía hay tantx que no hemos.

Todavía hay tantx que no.

Todavía hay tantx que.

Todavía hay tantx.

Todavía hay.

Todavía.

ODAYMARA CUESTA AND OLIVIA PRENDES



Crooked Pinky

Lisa juttet her hands up to my face, *I'm a Rodriguez too. Got grandma's pinkies.* All us Rodriguez women are crooked little-finger ladies. We're buried with beaded rosaries wrapped snugly around our clasped palms, crucifixes dangling below the crook in our pinkies. Lisa feels connected to us. She is and isn't. Half-Canadian so she's a pale-skinned, blue-eyed, dirty blonde and didn't grow up eating tacos; at 22 she can't hold one without the stuffing dangling or falling out. But the pinky is her proof that she is from this line of hard, dark-skinned Mexican women, rock candy ladies that take espinas from nopales with our teeth when a knife isn't handy. We are known for starting fights with other women and even our husbands could (but never would) confess to receiving a cracked bone or two from a Rodriguez woman's clenched fist. The crocheted doilies we make are coasters for our beer. We knit for our husbands so they'll know our hands are agile with sharp objects. Lisa doesn't know this history, can't name our abuela's hand cream, doesn't know great tía's secret handshake. But she has the crooked pinky every Rodriguez woman carries as we live our lives any way but straight.

CELESTE GUZMÁN MENDOZA



In which Justin speaks for himself

My mother and I made our case.
Now the lawyers and judges
will decide if we stay, or if we go.

I was not in the courtroom,
but outside my primos' house,
bouncing a ball against the wall.

Tíos and tías called out,
"Justin, Justin, ven a cenar."
Some food I've never tasted
was placed in front of me.
A primo said, "It's hummus."
A tía has taken it up,
loading it on top of her pita bread,
which looks like a tortilla.

I waited until 'amá sat down
at the table before I tasted it.

I studied the dirt
caked on my new zapatos.

TERESA PALOMO ACOSTA





Arizona to Texas

US border patrol asking
for my documents as I pull up blasting

“By the Time I Get to Arizona”

It doesn't matter if you have a diploma
It doesn't matter if you feed the economy
It doesn't matter if you believe in the monopoly

getting searched now, no probable cause
they try to move us all out of the state with a clause,

a Senate Bill of fear, lies that they hand me, slamming me
on the cop car, damaging, mad at me for what?

For supporting this nation of glut
and they think we won't stand up

when Texas school boards retell the past to the young
a story for some to try to keep us dumb

with lies they cover up resistance:
raza uprisings and lynchings all silenced

I want to know “What's Going On?” like Marvin Gaye sings
as I watch the hatred that life brings

pride stings on a street sign, projecting hate to my people
saying that we're not equal

with alien references and fences
we're cast off as irrelevant and defenseless

but against this hate
I drive on and transcend borders across states

MARCO CERVANTES



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